

## THE GOSPEL OF IMMORTALITY AND JOY

[I]T will undoubtedly be a great surprise to many of our non-Jaina friends to be told that Jainism is not an idolatrous creed and is as bitterly opposed to idol-worship as the most iconoclastic religion in the world, yet the fact is as stated. The attitude of Jainism towards idolatry is evident from the following from the *Ratna Karanda Śravakācāra*, a work of paramount authority, composed by Sri Samantabhadraçārya, who flourished about the commencement of the second century A.D. :—

“Bathing in [the so-called sacred] rivers and oceans, setting up heaps of sand and stones [as objects of worship], immolating one-self by falling from a precipice or by being burnt up in fire [as in *sati*] are some of the common *murhatīs* (superstitions or follies). The worshipping, with desire, to obtain favour of deities whose minds are full of personal likes and dislikes is called the folly of devotion to false divinity. Know that to be *guru murhatī* which consists in the worshipping of false ascetics revolving in the wheel of *samsāra* (births and deaths, i.e., transmigration), who have neither renounced worldly goods, nor occupations, nor *himsā* (causing injury to others).”

This is sufficient authority for the view that Jainism strongly condemns fetish worship—the cult of rivers, stones and the like—as well as devotion to human and super-human beings who have not eradicated their lower nature, that is to say, who are liable to be swayed by passion and by personal likes and dislikes. What, then, is the significance of the image-worship which takes place daily in our temples, and which is, undoubtedly, the cause of the false impression that has been formed by the non-Jainas concerning our faith?

To explain the nature of the worship that is performed in our temples, it is necessary first of all to summarise the Jaina creed, which fully accounts for it. The Jainas believe that every soul is godly by nature and endowed with all those attributes of perfection.

which are associated with our truest and best conception of divinity. These divine attributes—omniscience, bliss and the like—are, however, not actually manifest in the case of the soul that is involved in transmigration, but will become so when it attains to *nirvana*.

*Nirvana* implies complete freedom from all those impurities of sin which limit and curtail the natural attributes and properties of the soul. Accordingly, the Jainas aspire to become Gods by crossing the sea of *samsāra* (births and deaths), and the creed they follow to obtain that devoutly wished-for consummation is the method which was followed by those who have already reached the goal in view—*nirvana*. It is this method which is known as Jainism, and the images that are installed in our temples are the statues or 'photos' of the greatest amongst those who have already reached *nirvana* and taught others the way to get there. They are called *Tirthamkaras*, literally, the makers or founders of a *tirtha*, a fordable channel or passage (across the ocean of births and deaths).

How did they cross the sea of *samsāra* themselves? By curbing their fleshly lusts and by purifying and perfecting their souls. We, too, have got to tread the path they trod, if we would attain to the heights they have attained. In a word, the *Tirthamkaras* are models of perfection for our souls to copy and to walk in the footsteps of. Their Images are kept in the temples to constantly remind us of our high ideal, and to inspire us with faith and confidence in our own souls. As for Their worship, They have no desire to be worshipped by us: Their perfection is immeasurably greater than we can praise: They are full and perfect in Their *wholeness*. We offer Them the devotion of our hearts, because in the initial stages of the journey, it is the most potent, if not the only means of making steady progress.

It is not mere hero-worship, though worship of a hero is transcendent admiration. As Carlyle put it, it is something more; we admire what we ourselves aspire to attain to.

The great English thinker, Thomas Carlyle, tells us:—

"I say great men are still admirable. I say there is at bottom, nothing else admirable? No nobler feeling than this of admiration for one higher than himself

dwells in the breast of man. It is to this hour, and at all hours, the *vivifying influence in man's life*.....Hero worship endures for ever while man endures. Boswell venerates his Johnson, right truly even in the eighteenth century. The unbelieving French believe in their Voltaire; and burst out round him into very curious Hero-worship in that last act of his life when they stifle him under roses .....At Paris his carriage is the *nucleus* of a comet, whose train fills whole streets. The ladies pluck a hair or two from his fur, to keep it as a sacred relic. There was nothing highest, beautifullest, noblest in all France that did not feel this man to be higher, beautifuller, nobler..... It will ever be so. We all love great men; love, venerate and bow down submissive before great men; nay can we honestly bow down to anything else? Ah, does not every true man *feel that he is himself made higher by doing reverence to what is really above him?* No nobler or more blessed feeling dwells in man's heart. And to me it is very cheering to consider that no sceptical logic, or general triviality, insincerity and aridity of any time and its influences can destroy this noble in-born loyalty and worship that is in man . . . .It is an eternal corner-stone from which they can begin to build themselves up . . . . That man, in some sense or other, worships heroes, that we all of us reverence and must ever reverence Great Men, this is to me, the living rock amid all rushings down whatsoever."

The italics are mine, and they speak for themselves. Even to-day men and women assemble, in thousands, in Trafalgar Square in London to do honour to a statue of stone that stands there; they illuminate the whole neighbourhood; they place garlands of flowers on the object of their adoration. Is it idolatry they practise? Are they idolators? No, no, such a thing is simply impossible; no one can accuse the English of idolatry! It is not worshipping the block of stone: they ask nothing from it: they offer it no food, nor do they pray to it. If you look more closely into their 'statue worship' you will find it to be the adoration of a something of which the figure is a symbol. It is not the statue of Nelson they assemble to worship, but the spirit of the brave man, the fearless sailor, who made England what she is to-day—the acknowledged Queen of the Seas. The English are a nation of sailors: take away their sea-power, and they are gone. But for the glorious achievements of the British Navy, England would have been overrun by Germany to-day. The English know it, and pour forth, spontaneously, almost unconsciously, the warmest devotion of their free hearts on the one being who saved them from utter ruin in the past. But if Nelson.

himself was able to save England from destruction once, 'his inspiration has been her salvation not once, not twice but repeatedly. The great sailor is now dead ; he may no longer command the fleet of England in the hour of danger ; he may win no more laurels for himself or victories for his country ; but his spirit and influence survive. For there is not a sailor lad in the whole of the United Kingdom who does not brighten up at the mention of Nelson's name, who does not reverently recognise him as a model of greatness for himself, who does not draw powerful inspiration from his life. The nation that placed the statue of this great man in a conspicuous part of the capital of their country knew they were not merely erecting a statue to the memory of a dead man, but *laying the foundation stone of their own greatness* for generations to come. Such is the true significance of 'Nelson-worship' which takes place on the Trafalgar Day annually. It is not idolatry that we can charge against the English, but *idealatry*, which, if a fault, is one that has been the source of unparalleled greatness to the culprit !

The Jaina form of worship is, similarly, an instance of *idealatry*, for devotion to God in Jainism only means devotion to the attributes of divinity which the devotee wishes to develop in his soul, and consists in the blending of the fullest measure of love and respect for those Great Ones who have evolved out those very attributes to perfection in their own case. The Jainas ask for nothing from their *Tirthamkaras* ; no prayers are ever offered to Them, nor are They supposed to be granting boons to Their devotees. They are not worshipped because worship is pleasing to Them, but because it is the source of the greatest good—the attainment of godly perfection—to our own souls. As said in the Key of Knowledge, the causal connection between the ideal of the soul and the worshipping of Those who have already realized it is to be found in the fact that the realization of an ideal demands one's whole-hearted attention, and is only possible by following in the footsteps of those who have actually reached the same goal. It is this idea which a great English poet has immortalized in the following words :—

"Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime

And, departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time :

“ Footprints that perhaps another,  
Sailing o'er life's solemn main—  
A forlorn and ship-wrecked brother,  
Seeing, shall take heart again. ”

The daily *pujā* (worship) and *prakshāla* (bathing) of the *pratibimbās* (statues of the Holy *Tirthamkaras* are the source of much good ; they tend to strengthen one's faith at the same time as they enable merit to be acquired by the withdrawal of the mind from the attachments and concerns of the world and by its being directed to the true side of Life. The whole scheme of worship in Jainism is that from the moment one sets one's foot in the temple till the time of one's departure from it, one should be constantly accumulating merit and the increase of piety and *Dharma*. The objection : how can an inanimate object like an image of metal, or stone, be the cause of so much good ? is met by the parable of the dead harlot propounded in the *Pārasva Purana*. The deceased courtesan, in the parable, was a woman of remarkable beauty and of great personal charms, and as her body lay on the ground three living beings, a *sāthū*, a licentious libertine and a jackal, gathered round it. Of these, the *sādhu* (saint) was filled with the spirit of *vairāgya* (renunciation) at the sight of her matchless beauty, and with pity for her departed spirit, thinking that if her life had been as virtuous and good as her beauty was faultless, she was certain to obtain heaven and *nirvana*. The libertine, on the other hand, feasted his eyes on the voluptuous contour of the prostrate figure before him, and abandoned himself to the agreeable hallucinations of pleasure it was calculated to afford in life. As for the jackal, he only prowled about, waiting for the departure of the other two to devour the corpse. The effect of their diverse mental states on the three individuals was that the *sādhu* went to heaven after death, the libertine descended into hell, but the jackal remained where he was before, that is to say, was reborn among the beasts of prey in his next incarnation. The principle to be deduced from the parable is that internal mental states are occasioned by external objects and things, and become the determining factors of the conditions of future life.

The *pratibimbās* of the Holy *Tirthamkaras*, depicting Them in the serene dispassionate attitude of pure equanimity, inspire us with the holiest of thoughts and engender the true spirit of *vairāgya* in our hearts; they also teach us the correct posture for meditation and *dhyāna* (self-contemplation). Consecrated *photos* of Living Divinity, they are well calculated to awaken the divine in ourselves, inspiring us with confidence in our own souls by the example of the Great Ones whom they represent. For all the *Tirthamkaras* were, at one time, men of flesh and blood like ourselves—aye, and sinful souls too; but They have destroyed the bondage of Their *karmas*, while we are still involved in it. Jainism is the scientific Path of Perfection, and its first principle is that no results are ever achieved except by one's own exertion. The Holy Ones put this great principle into practice and perfected Themselves, attaining to heights of glory beyond the imagination of ordinary men. Pure perfect Knowledge, embracing all the facts of the three worlds—Celestial Realms, our own World and the lower Regions (*Pātala*, hells and the like)—and of the three times, the past, present and future, infinite perception, undying, unending, unabating bliss and innumerable other divine qualities find an abode in Their pure Souls. Death, disease, sorrow and sickness cannot affect Them; They are beyond the reach of ill-luck and pain! Those who follow Them attain to Their Greatness and Perfection, and becoming like Them in all respects reach *nirvana* at the top of the universe, to reside there, for ever, in the undisturbed enjoyment of infinite peace, tranquillity and joy, together with all those other attributes—omniscience, immortality and the like—which people associate with their Gods. For divinity is verily the real nature of the soul, though it is defiled and vitiated by the forces engendered by individual *karmas* in the case of unredeemed beings. Jainism is the creed which enables the soul to destroy the bondage of *karma*, and the *Tirthamkaras* are the greatest friends and well-wishers of *Jivas* (souls) whom They take by the hand, as it were, and carry across the turbulent sea of *samsāra*, provided They are allowed to do so. Who, then, can describe the glory of the system—what language is competent to paint the Greatness of the Masters, that enable the soul to free itself from its inauspicious bondage of *karmas*, that impart to it strength

and courage to defy such powerful foes as sickness and death, that enable it to attain to unsurpassed splendour, in short, that turn puny, miserable mortals into omniscient blissful Gods, the object of worship and adoration for all times to come? As said in the *Ratna Karanda Śrāvākāchāra* :—

“Those whose hearts have been purified by Right Faith become the Lords of Splendour, Energy, Wisdom, Prowess, Fame, Wealth, Victory and Greatness; they are born in high families, and possess the ability to realise the highest ideals of Life; they are the best of men!

“Those who are endowed with Right Faith are born in the Heaven-world, where they become the devotees of Lord Jinendra, and endowed with eight kinds of miraculous powers and splendour, enjoy themselves for long millenniums in the company of *devas*<sup>1</sup> and *devanganas*!<sup>2</sup>

“By virtue of Right Faith men acquire the supreme Status of a *Tirthamkara*, the Master who knows all things well, whose feet are worshipped by the Rulers of *devas*, Lords of *asuras* and kings of men as well as by holy saints, who is the Support of *Dharma*,<sup>3</sup> and the protector of all living beings in the three worlds!

“They who take refuge in Right Faith finally attain to the Supreme Seat, i.e., *moksha*,<sup>4</sup> which is free from old age, disease, destruction, decrease, grief, fear and doubt, and implies unqualified perfection in respect of wisdom and Bliss, and freedom from all kinds of impurities of *karma*!

“The *bhavya*<sup>5</sup> who follows the creed of the Holy *Tirthamkaras* acquires the immeasurable glory of *deva*-life and the discus of a *chakravarti*<sup>6</sup> before whom kings and rulers of men prostrate themselves, and attaining to supremely worshipful status of Godhood finally also reaches *nirvana*.”

*Śri Jaina Dharma ki jai.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Male residents of heavens.    <sup>2</sup> Wives of *devas*.    <sup>3</sup> Religion.    <sup>4</sup> Salvation.

<sup>5</sup> He who possesses the realizable potentiality of Godhood.    <sup>6</sup> One of the twelve great emperors of the cycle.